

Property owner: Time might be running out to expand Beaufort National Cemetery

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Time may be running out to expand Beaufort National Cemetery, says Chuck Welsh, who owns five nearby acres on Lafayette Street.

For more than two years, Welsh has had discussions with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and other officials about selling his property, upon which the Lafayette Square apartment complex now sits and which is adjacent to the 147-year-old, 49-acre burial ground.

Welsh said those discussions came to a halt following the December 2009 death of Col. Jimmie Leach, a decorated World War II veteran who spearheaded the local campaign for cemetery expansion.

"When Jimmie Leach died, a lot of the energy behind this whole thing went away," Welsh said. "The whole balloon just deflated and it's so sad because he worked so tirelessly to make this happen."

Before his death, Leach pushed U.S. Rep. **Joe Wilson**, R-SC, to introduce a bill in January 2009 to allow the VA to buy the land for about \$3 million. The bill was referred to the House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, where it remains.

Welsh said he is running out of patience.

"I've given the people of Beaufort and the VA as much time as I have," said Welsh of Glyndon, Md. "I'd love for that property to go to the VA but I don't want to wait any longer."

Welsh said he plans to soon meet with engineers to discuss redeveloping the property and expanding the complex from 40 to 120 units.

Once he does, the property, which he has owned for 12 years, will be off the market.

"Once I start spending engineering dollars, I won't entertain anymore offers from the VA," Welsh said.

Wilson said he does not blame the property owner for his frustration.

"(Welsh) has not been the problem here," Wilson said. "I'm concerned and I'm frustrated. I know the VA has real estate acquisition funds. This should be able to happen without me having to pass a bill."

Officials from the VA could not be reached for comment last week.

Originally built on about 30 acres of land along Boundary Street, the cemetery grew by another 15 acres in 2006, 10 of which were donated by the National Guard, which had built an armory next to the site in 1963. The cemetery has burial space through 2030, according to officials.

With 20,000 servicemembers and their spouses currently buried at the cemetery, Wilson said he believes it may run out of space before then, and that now is the time to purchase the additional acreage.

"2030 is right around the corner," Wilson said. "For all we know, 2030 might be 2025. I'm thinking of all those veterans currently serving in Iraq and Afghanistan who will be the next big wave of veterans passing away (Welsh's) is really the best parcel to square off the property."

If he does decide to move forward with redevelopment, Welsh said building on the property won't begin for another year, giving the VA one last chance to buy his land and expand the cemetery

"This is really their last chance to buy my land," he said.

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